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SUBJECT: NEW REFORMS SEEK TO IMPROVE TRAFFIC LAW COMPLIANCE, LESSEN  
CORRUPTION

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¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Armenia's traffic police division implemented reforms in late 2006 aimed at modernizing their operations with an eye toward reducing corruption. The traffic police adopted new procedures for citing driving infractions which include plans for the purchase of more modern equipment. The result of these new procedures is an obvious, if superficial, reduction in the incidence of predatory bribe taking on Armenia's roads. The Traffic Police Division Commander claims that the reforms will reduce bribe taking among members of the force, but this practice is entrenched and systemic and will be difficult to overcome. Moreover, unless the low wages paid to traffic police officers are increased, officers will have little incentive to discontinue taking bribes from motorists. End summary.

#### INTRODUCTION

¶2. (U) Visitors to Armenia can not help but notice the country's chaotic traffic, particularly in Yerevan. Drivers routinely ignore traffic lights while negotiating badly maintained roads. Lane designations are treated as mere suggestions; it is not unusual to see a line of five cars abreast squeezed into two lanes at an intersection. If there is any empty space on an Armenian road there will be a driver willing to fill it.

¶3. (U) Currently, there are more than 300,000 cars and trucks registered in Armenia. The country imports another 20,000 cars annually. Coupled with the poor state of Armenia's roads it is not surprising that the traffic police report a significant rise in the accident rate over the last few years.

¶4. (SBU) Armenia's traffic police have done little to alleviate the situation. In fact, the force has a notorious reputation for corruption. It is rumored that patrolmen pay their superiors for the most "profitable" roadside spots, i.e. locations on busy streets where officers can pull over passing motorists and solicit bribes. In those instances where a motorist actually receives a citation, the driver must go to the police station or a local bank to pay the fine. It is not possible to pay by mail or over the Internet. This cumbersome procedure creates a strong incentive for motorists to settle their infractions "informally" with the patrolman.

¶5. (U) In a 2006 nationwide corruption perception survey conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 87 per cent of respondents rated the traffic police as "very corrupt" or "corrupt." A local NGO, the "Achilles" Society for the Defense of Drivers' Rights ([www.achill.am](http://www.achill.am)) exposes the corrupt practices of the traffic police and agitates for reform.

¶6. (U) In this atmosphere the GOAM formed an advisory committee in 2005 to study traffic control standards in a number of European countries. Based on their recommendations, President Kocharian signed an order containing 39 directives aimed at reforming the traffic police on April 4, 2006. The traffic police implemented the new procedures last November, although the actual legislation codifying the changes has yet to pass the National Assembly.

#### MEETING WITH THE HEAD OF THE TRAFFIC POLICE

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¶6. (U) Colonel Ishkhan Ishkhanyan, Head of the Traffic Division of the Republic of Armenia Police, discussed the changes with TCAOff. He began by noting his organization was based on outdated Soviet standards. The new organizational set-up will replace the many local autonomous traffic police organizations currently in place with two major subdivisions, one for Yerevan and another for the rest of the country. Reform is necessary to ensure the "globalization" (his word, read: modernization) of the traffic police.

¶8. (U) TCAOff asked about the persistent local criticism of his officers citing motorists for infractions from the side of the road. Traffic police officers would stand next to their parked patrol cars on busy streets, signaling passing motorists to pull over for alleged traffic violations. Many complain that these "infractions" are nonexistent and the real reason for the stop is to ask for a bribe.

¶9. (U) Colonel Ishkhanyan candidly acknowledged that this situation was a real problem. However, he was upbeat that the new procedures in place, coupled with the acquisition of some modern technology, would go a long way to secure the public's trust.

¶10. (U) The new procedures prohibit a traffic police officer from pulling over a motorist from the side of the road. An officer must now see the infraction while driving in traffic. Only then may he stop the motorist and issue a citation.

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¶11. (U) This policy is in place with an eye toward purchasing new equipment. The GOAM is currently negotiating with the World Bank to buy a fleet of new police cars, built by Volkswagen. The cars will come equipped with dash-mounted video cameras, GPS systems and computer connectivity. The traffic police ultimately hope to deploy 400 such cars nationwide.

¶12. (U) Once the new cars are in place, each patrolman will be assigned a specific route. The officer will not be allowed to deviate from that route unless responding to a specific emergency. The GPS system will verify a car's position at all times. The system will also show how many stops the patrolman makes. The officer is expected to provide an explanation for every stop.

¶13. (U) Colonel Ishkhanyan said that an officer will not be able to stop a motorist if the camera does not record the violation. The procedure will work something like this: when a patrolman spots an infraction he will pull the vehicle over and write a citation. The motorist then has the option of immediately paying the fine to the officer or he may pay the fine at a local bank. Officials in the central monitoring center will then review the tape from the car's video camera and verify that the violation took place.

¶14. (U) The new system should give greater control over each patrolman's activities. But at first glance, giving an officer the option of accepting payment of the fine would appear to increase bribery opportunities. However, Colonel Ishkhanyan insists that the new system will actually reduce corruption. The video record of each patrolman's actions, as well as the GPS system's record of the number of stops, would theoretically inhibit a patrolman's ability to stop cars at random and demand bribes. (Provided, of course, that those who monitor the system enforce the new regulations and sanction those officers who violate them.)

¶15. (U) Colonel Ishkhanyan admits that the reputation of the traffic police is in need of serious repair. In addition to the

discussed reforms, he plans to accelerate recruitment efforts for new officers who are proficient in computers and English. "This [referring to the reform program] is the 'globalization' of the traffic system," he said, "and there is no turning back."

#### ANALYSIS

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¶16. (U) There is no question that the traffic police need reform. An informal poll among the Embassy's locally employed staff revealed that many had been pulled over by patrolmen parked on the side of the road. A bribe would often ensue.

¶18. (U) There is one potential reform that Colonel Ishkhanyan failed to mention: improving the salaries paid to his officers. The starting monthly salary for a new traffic police officer is around 40,000 dram, about \$110US. It is not surprising that a culture of corruption arose to augment such meager pay.

¶19. (SBU) There is also the practice of "position buying" to consider. One former police lieutenant colonel told TCAOff that moving up the "corporate ladder" in the Armenian police force requires a substantial outlay of cash. For example, a Detachment Commander might pay \$50,000US to become a Deputy Police Chief, a Deputy Detachment Commander may pay \$30,000US to become a Detachment Commander, a Precinct Captain may pay \$20,000US to become a Deputy Detachment Commander, and so on. As a result, supervisors often take a certain percentage off the top of their subordinates' salaries to recoup those outlays. An underling might be expected to "kick up" as much as 60% of his salary to his immediate superior, who must pass on a percentage of his salary to his boss, etc. The structure seems similar to an organized crime operation.

¶20. (SBU) New recruits in the traffic police are not immune. Unofficial sources report that candidates must buy their positions on the force. The new officer would then expect to recoup his "initiation fee" by soliciting bribes from motorists.

¶21. (SBU) Needless to say, Embassy sources report a great deal of dissatisfaction with the new procedures among traffic police officers. Prohibiting the roadside stopping of motorists removed an important source of income. Although rumors are circulating that salaries will be raised to \$300 to \$500 a month after legislative approval of the reforms, the GOAM has not officially endorsed the idea.

¶20. (SBU) The discontented may wield some political clout: Colonel Ishkhanyan noted that there is opposition to the reforms among some members of the National Assembly. However, he remains confident that the changes will eventually receive legislative approval.

#### CONCLUSION

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¶21. (U) So far, the new procedures seem to be taking hold. TCAOff has not seen a police officer pulling motorists over from the side of the road for quite some time. But corruption issues aside, Armenia has a long way to go to achieve a European standard of traffic control. Colonel Ishkhanyan himself noted how well Armenians follow the traffic laws in Glendale, California, yet choose to ignore them in their own country. Whether the reforms will usher in a culture of safe driving remains to be seen, but most would agree the situation could not get any worse.  
GODFREY